

DOCUMENTARY RECORDINGS IN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY:  
THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS\*

by

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In this paper I shall summarize some of the early achievements in the history of ethnomusicological recordings, discuss a few of the theoretical and methodological problems involved in the production and presentation of documentary ethnomusicological material, and propose some directions and means for the resolution of these problems.

The invention of the phonograph contemporaneously in 1877 by Thomas A. Edison in the United States and Charles Cros in France had a profound effect on the study of orally-transmitted music as it had been observed and described in both Western and non-Western societies. Before this invention, musicologists were obliged to notate the variables of music performance by the use of ear and hand alone, transcribing directly in the performance situation. The mechanical repetition of such variables by the phonograph permitted first of all a more accurate transcription of the musical phenomena, and secondly allowed variations from performance to performance of the same item or items to be studied in greater detail.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnologists and folklorists as well as ethnomusicologists were quick to see the possibilities of the invention. J. Walter Fewkes, the American anthropologist, was apparently the first to use the new equipment in his field recordings of Zuni and Passamaquoddy Indians in 1889.<sup>2</sup> In Europe, Béla Vikár made recordings of

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Hungarian folksongs in 1892,<sup>3</sup> and by the turn of the century studies utilizing phonograph cylinder recordings were published both in Europe and the United States. Fewkes, who later became director of the Bureau of American Ethnology in Washington, sponsored a great deal of research on native Indian music, including the extensive recording activities of Frances Densmore.<sup>4</sup>

Archives were established at the Bureau and at various centers in Europe, the purpose of such archives being the storage, preservation, and scientific study of field recordings. The first of these centers in Europe was the Phonogramm-Archiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna, founded in 1899.<sup>5</sup> The best-known and most rapidly developed of the early archives, however, was the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, an institution which gained its fame largely through the presence of the distinguished musicologist Erich M. von Hornbostel and a group of researchers who came to be known collectively as the Berlin School.<sup>6</sup>

The achievements of the Berlin School merit some attention in any survey of ethnomusicological recordings. Von Hornbostel's work began in his capacity as assistant to Carl Stumpf, the renowned professor of psychology at the University of Berlin, who had been interested in ethnomusicological questions since 1886.<sup>7</sup> When the Siamese court orchestra came to perform in Berlin in 1900, Stumpf took advantage of the occasion to make his first phonograph recordings, thereby laying the foundations of the Phonogramm-Archiv, although it was not known by this name until later. Holdings in the Archive were increased not only by the field research of its staff but also through exchanges with other institutions, and the accelerated growth of the center made possible the appointment of von Hornbostel as its director in 1905.

Von Hornbostel quickly arranged to have the existing cylinders at the Archive copied, although the technical problems at that time did not permit satisfactory results. But the knowledge that Berlin had means of producing copies of cylinder recordings spread among professional scholars, and a number of individuals and centers sent recordings to the Phonogramm-Archiv for reproduction and exchange, thus augmenting the holdings

considerably. One of these individuals was Béla Bartók, who contacted von Hornbostel in 1912.<sup>8</sup> An example of the activity of this group of German scholars was the special project set in motion in that same year, 1912, of recording linguistic and musical data from prisoners of war housed in camps near Berlin. Under the direction of Stumpf, Georg Schuenemann as a principal collaborator supervised some 1,020 cylinder recordings, and Wilhelm Doegen some 1,650 disc recordings.<sup>9</sup> Altogether, therefore, projects of the Berlin Archive between 1905 and 1914 reflected a phenomenal expansion in both size and significance for the world of comparative musicology, the term by which the investigative field was known at that time.

It ought to be remarked that a number of younger scholars worked in the Archive as volunteers, and many of these later emigrated to other parts of the world, introducing and making influential the theories, methods, and techniques of the Berlin School. The most prominent of these were George Herzog, Mieczyslaw Kolinski, Fritz Bose, Henry Cowell, and Marius Schneider, the latter acting as head of the Archive after the departure of von Hornbostel from Germany in 1934 and until the outbreak of World War II. These scholars also contributed scientific monographs based on the Archive's material, such studies numbering 56 by the year 1938.<sup>10</sup>

All this activity, however, was not solely confined to scholarly and scientific laboratory research and publication. One of von Hornbostel's projects was a Demonstration Collection based on recordings made from 1900 through 1913. This is a unique document in the early history of ethnomusicological recordings, for it contains some of the earliest and most authentic examples of non-Western music ever issued as a commercial proposition. Not many sets of the original collection were sold, but this may be because von Hornbostel published, in 1931, his Musik des Orients, twelve 78 rpm shellac pressings under the Odeon and Parlophone labels issued by the Carl Lindström Corporation. In 1963 Ethnic Folkways produced a two-disc album of forty-two cylinder recordings selected from the original Demonstration Collection, with notes by Kurt Reinhard, the present director of the Phonogramm-Archiv, and George List of Indiana University.<sup>11</sup>

The acoustical quality of many of the tracks on this reissue was deficient since, not only had the original cylinders deteriorated, but the tapes used for the Folkways discs were copies of master tapes copied from cylinder recordings which were themselves copies of the original cylinder recordings. But the content of the original Demonstration Collection reflects the theoretical, comparative basis of the Berlin School's interests and, as can be observed in the writings of the group at least in this early period, annotations concerning the material tended toward description in terms of musical structure and the comparison of these structures with similar phenomena in other cultures. Comparative musicology, the German Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft, aimed at the comparison of musical structures in the cultures of the world known to the field, and the later shift to depth studies of single or related cultures resulted from a dissatisfaction among other musicologists with the assumptions, theories, and methods of the Berlin School. The work of Franz Boas and his students among American Indians, for example, influenced this trend away from the full-fledged comparative approach.<sup>12</sup>

The descriptive, comparative perspective in the analysis of musical phenomena nevertheless dominated European and American studies for some time, with the methodological emphasis firmly placed upon the transcription, analysis, and classification of musical structures. The important work of Bartók, whose great collection of Hungarian peasant material was made between 1903 and 1939, is chiefly concerned with the detailed description and classification of musical structure.<sup>13</sup>

The collections of Bartók and Kodály were housed in the ethnological section of the National Museum in Budapest, but many of the recordings were lost, destroyed, or damaged during World War II. Although his early recordings were made in the field, Bartók later arranged for the singers and players to come to Budapest, where recordings were made under his supervision in the studios of the Hungarian Broadcasting Company. These performers, it is interesting to note, had never seen the city. They were, like Bartók's previous informants, peasants, and there may be some indication of a significant shift in Bartók's interests in the fact that after each

performance in these later recordings, he asked each performer to announce his or her name, age, village, and occupation. A selection of these items was issued in 1950 by Ethnic Folkways with notes by Henry Cowell.

In summary, then, the growth of ethnomusicology as a discipline went hand in hand with a considerable expansion of archives and collections of field and studio recordings. In Europe, most of the institutions responsible for the housing of such collections received state support, or functioned as part of already existing ethnological departments. In the United States, the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress formally came into being in 1928, subsequently issuing important documentary recordings of native American material. Archives of importance were established at several universities, particularly Indiana, Northwestern, and UCLA. These have provided the basis for scholarly research and publication as well as for the occasional issue for the commercial market.<sup>14</sup>

It was not until the early 1950's that commercially sponsored recordings of folk and ethnic music became widely available to the public. Companies, such as Folkways Corporation with its multiple series, then began issuing significant albums for general consumption, these being drawn from numerous musical cultures, both Western and non-Western. On the whole these early commercial recordings were surveys of the music of nations, tribes, or groups, but more specialized productions also appeared, such as William Bascom's Drums of the Yoruba of Nigeria, in which the various uses and styles of drumming were illustrated. Columbia's World Library of Folk and Primitive Music produced some outstanding surveys under the editorship of Alan Lomax. The International Library of African Music brought out an extended series of LP's entitled The Sound of Africa, edited by Hugh Tracey, containing expositions of distinctive styles and accompanied by detailed notes on cards.<sup>15</sup>

From a study of many of the commercial productions of the past twenty years one can perceive a marked unevenness in quality, with regard both to subject matter and to its presentation. The booklets and notes which invariably accompanied these discs sometimes appeared to

have been compiled by persons quite unfamiliar with the circumstances of the recordings or even, in some cases, of the culture itself. The choice of material was frequently left unexplained, and field recordings were often effected by amateur enthusiasts without proper ethnomusicological or folkloristic training in the problems of field work. One occasionally, and regrettably, had the impression that the purpose behind the production was that it should be issued at all costs, regardless of quality, accuracy, or attention to the nature of the material and its cultural significance. Annotations, too, were often so cursory as to be virtually useless.

George List, who has been involved in documentary recordings as Director of the Indiana University Archives of Folk and Primitive Music, recently made some general but pertinent comments concerning the recording of traditional music for public consumption:

Much folk music is recorded by amateurs who are moved to do so by their aesthetic appreciation of the music or through their interest in the cultural group that performs this music. There are also those whose principal purpose in collecting is to secure materials for the issuance of albums of recordings. The utility of such recordings in the study of folk music depends to a great extent upon the degree of background information that accompanies the recordings and upon the accuracy of such information.<sup>16</sup>

Even productions with prestigious sponsorship, however, have not been without their faults or immune to criticism. Laurence Picken, a foremost Western scholar of Chinese music, reviewed the UNESCO Musical Anthology of the Orient with these words: "An anthology that includes much interesting and beautiful music is reduced to a fraction of its potential value by slipshodness in documentation." It fell considerably below the scholarly standards of von Hornbostel's Musik des Orients, in Picken's opinion.<sup>17</sup>

As far as productions supervised and produced by professional ethnomusicologists are concerned, awareness of the necessity of critical standards of documentation and annotation has slowly made its effect.

Handsome sets of German traditional folk songs supervised by the Deutsches Volksliedarchiv or those produced by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences are contemporary models of their kind: multi-disc sets accompanied by transcribed texts and music, studies of the informants, and comparative notes.<sup>18</sup> Even without state support an extensive series has occasionally been marketed by a commercial company in conjunction with a state-financed body, such as the RCA issues of Norwegian folk music from the Archives of Norwegian Radio.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand commercial issues made without the supervision of a specialist in the culture tend to be of limited worth. It is still a comparative rarity to come across a commercial recording of folk or ethnic music which is well-conceived as to subject matter, efficiently produced, technically satisfying, and accurately and thoroughly annotated, so that the consumer receives the impression of some kind of integrative intelligence at work. As I wrote in a recent record review:

What criteria does a hypothetical producer observe in the conception and execution of a series in a particular category of music? Are these criteria (if they are admitted to exist) applied with any consistency? At whom is the product chiefly directed? Is there a way companies can judge the response to a specific disc apart from the reactions of professional reviewers? It would be a considerable service both to such reviewers and to the public at large if enlightened companies were to include on each disc a short statement on aims, methods and expectations, or at least print such on their regular company catalog and brochures. A lengthy apologia would not be necessary; most commercial producers must be aware, however, that in the field of ethnic music they are dealing with a reasonably intelligent consumer who may well be curious about the motivations and production processes behind certain record issues. Informative statements on such processes have usually been confined to isolated discs and to small individual companies. Nevertheless, these producers should pay the consumer the compliment of assuming that he or she is interested not only

in what is contained on the soundtrack but also in the wider issues and processes connected with the existence of, and quality of, commercial ethnic recordings, from general policy down to the rationale behind the individual recordings.<sup>20</sup>

These strictures were written with consumption by the general public in mind. But professional scholars are also obliged to rely on commercial companies for access to their study materials, and for that reason are part of the general public qua consumers. A hypothetical company or producer, presumed to be of good will but also concerned about market possibilities, production costs, and balance sheets is therefore faced with the question: For whom is the product intended? There does not, however, need to be a unilateral solution to the question. One can readily conceive of general, introductory records of quality intended for the public at large, as well as of more specialized productions for scholarly or professional interests. The difference would clearly lie in the intensity of exploration of a particular music as well as in the extent and quantity of accompanying annotations and background information.

Such general remarks, then, are intended to review some of the problems inherent in the conception and production of ethnic music on disc, whether issued by institutional, state-supported bodies or by commercial companies. These problems have been considered from the viewpoint of the ethnomusicologist and the producer, but the consumer's attitude is worth considering. On the subject of documentary recordings, that is, recordings which explore in some depth some aspect of a society or culture, it is clear that the supposition may exist in many people's minds that such recordings are intended solely for the specialists's interest, that they are intended to be edifying rather than entertaining (even though these qualities need not be mutually exclusive), and instructive rather than excitative (when this may not be the case by any broadly applicable, objective standards of evaluation). But it can certainly be argued that the focus of the producer must be on the quality of his product, and that ultimately it is quality which counts, even if it does not initially sell. And the gradual increase of ethnomusicological



archives in the United States and North America can guarantee a reasonable quantity of sales to university- and state college-funded programs.

At this point one may consider the optimum standards possible and desirable in the conception and production of ethnomusicological documentary recordings. The specialist and nonspecialist alike will want to know some basic facts: Where was the recording made and when? Who performed the item or items recorded? What was the nature of such items? This is information which establishes a minimal but essential frame of reference for any recording of ethnic or traditional music. It is also of interest to know whether the music was recorded in the field or in the studio (this is not always obvious), whether the music was performed by musicians native to the culture, and whether or not the music was "arranged" for performance. These are questions which cannot be easily answered just by listening. It is logical to assert once again, then, that the value of the record, indeed the possibility of evaluating it seriously at all, are both dependent on the presence and quality of accompanying annotations.<sup>21</sup>

In assuming that a recording is intended mainly, though not exclusively, for use and study by scholars, students, or others professionally involved in the culture, can one suggest a conceptual framework which goes beyond the basic information mentioned above, and into which full and precise documentation of the material might fall? The questions and problems with which the ethnomusicologist is concerned are complex and multifarious ones dealing with the role of music in culture; there are consequently some necessary conceptual divisions which may act as a framework in formulating interpretative treatment of a music or musics.

1. Aspects which are extrinsic to the musical data merit attention, such as (a) time and space, (b) matrix, social context, function. In treating (a), the cultural continuum is established as the outer conceptual frame, questions of origin, history, and distribution of forms and styles discussed, the stable and variable elements of the material analyzed, and problems of acculturation and change indicated. In treating (b), the focus would narrow to the specific performance

context and event; problems of social and aesthetic function would be investigated, as would the significance of various norms and practices within the musical life of the culture.

2. Aspects which are intrinsic to the musical data merit attention, such as (a) the performer, and (b) his or her material. In treating (a), the relationship of the performer to the audience must give rise to significant questions, and other performer-oriented problems worth treatment would be: his or her function as an active or passive tradition-bearer, the extent of the performer's creativity, whether he or she creates rather than re-creates (and the interrelationship of that process), whether he or she "presents" or "performs" the musical material (if such a question, directed towards the performer's aesthetic sense, can in fact be answered by him or her).<sup>22</sup> In treating (b), factors of texture, content, and structure may be discussed. Although the texture of the musical sound is already present on the recording, analysis of its components may provide useful information for a student, for example, the description of the instrumentation of an ensemble. Musical content and its interpretation will undoubtedly raise serious problems of subjective response, but the associative and connotative aspects of the music may be an important and analyzable factor.<sup>23</sup> If a text, including nonsemantic or non-lexical sounds, is present, the content of all of these may be susceptible to analysis. Analysis of musical structure involves transcription techniques, whether conventional or mechanical, and such transcription may be included as descriptive of structural elements such as mode, contour, rhythm. Structural analysis may also, or alternatively, be concerned with other aspects, such as the morphology of forms, or the formation of conceptual performance models. The emphasis in analysis will naturally lie with the perspectives of the annotator. Classificatory levels within the genre of the item or items may be a further aim of the producer.

3. Aspects of ethnomusicological value merit attention. These will clearly be concerned with the rationale of the recording and its contents, its place in the context of previous work in the field (either with regard to culture area or methodology), and any

complementary or contradictory factors where such occur in comparing the present production with others. Such evaluation would utilize scholarly documentation in terms of bibliographical as well as discographical sources relating to the material. Evaluative comments appended to such research and documentation would be preferable to a simple chronological listing of works.

These, then, are three conceptual areas in which questions of significance for the investigator of musical cultures may fruitfully be treated, even though they are by no means all the possible questions with which ethnomusicologists or students of cultural processes are concerned. The above factors may, however, provide a model framework within which the researcher can manipulate his materials with some flexibility.

#### Notes

1. See Percy Grainger, "Collecting with the phonograph," Journal of the Folk-Song Society, No. 12 (May, 1908), pp. 147-169, for discussion of the novel advantages of transcription from phonograph recordings. Contrasting examples of transcription from phonograph and transcription from actual performance are illustrated in Unto Brigg Fair: Joseph Taylor and other traditional Lincolnshire singers recorded in 1908 by Percy Grainger (Leader LEA 4050 mono, 1972).
2. See J. W. Fewkes, "On the use of the phonograph among the Zuni Indians," American Naturalist 24 (1890), pp. 687-691; also J. Walter Fewkes, "A contribution to Passamaquoddy folk-lore," Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 3 (1890), pp. 257-280.
3. See Walter Graf, "The Phonogrammarchiv der oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Vienna," The Folklore and Folk Music Archivist, Vol. IV, No. 4 (Winter, 1962).
4. See Bruno Nettl, Music in Primitive Culture, 1956, pp. 151-152 for a list of Densmore's works. Her best known book is Teton Sioux Music, 1918,

published as Bulletin 61 of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

5. See Graf, op. cit.
6. See Kurt Reinhard, "The Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv," The Folklore and Folk Music Archivist, Vol. V, No. 2 (Summer, 1962).
7. Carl Stumpf, "Lieder der Bellakula Indianer," Vierteljahrschrift fuer Musikwissenschaft, 2 (1886), pp. 405-426.
8. See Reinhard, op. cit., for a reproduction and translation of Bartók's letter.
9. See Kurt Reinhard, "History of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv," The Demonstration Collection of E. M. von Hornbostel and the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv (Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4175, 1963), p. 9.
10. Reinhard, ibid., p. 10.
11. The Archives of Folk and Primitive Music at Indiana University was founded by George Herzog at Columbia University in 1936, and was modeled to some extent upon the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv. When Herzog was appointed Professor of Anthropology at Indiana in 1948 the Archives were transferred to Indiana also. George List, the present director, was appointed in 1954.
12. See Nettl, op. cit., p. 34. An example of Boas' work which was influential is The Central Eskimo, 1888, published as the Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology. The book contains many song transcriptions with indications of their culture context. See also Boas' chapter "Literature, music, and dance," in his Primitive Art, 1927, pp. 299-348.
13. See Béla Bartók, Hungarian Folk Music, 1931; Béla Bartók and Albert B. Lord, Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs, 1951.
14. See Rae Korson, "The Archive of Folk Song in the

- Library of Congress," The Folklore and Folk Music Archivist, Vol. II, No. 1 (Spring, 1959) and Vol. II, No. 2 (Summer, 1959); George List, "The Indiana University Archives of Folk and Primitive Music," The Folklore and Folk Music Archivist, Vol. II, No. 4 (Winter, 1959); Alan P. Merriam, "The Northwestern University Laboratory of Comparative Musicology," The Folklore and Folk Music Archivist, Vol. I, No. 4 (December, 1958); D. K. Wilgus, "The Western Kentucky Folklore Archive," The Folklore and Folk Music Archivist, Vol. I, No. 4 (December, 1958).
15. See Bruno Nettl, Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology, 1964, p. 56. A description of the International Library can be found in Hugh Tracey, "The International Library of African Music," The Folklore and Folk Music Archivist, Vol. IV, No. 2 (Summer, 1961).
  16. George List, "Fieldwork: recording traditional music," in Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. by Richard M. Dorson, 1972, p. 445.
  17. Journal of the International Folk Music Council, Vol. XIV (1962), p. 142.
  18. Gottscheer Volkslieder, Balladen aus ostdeutscher Ueberlieferung, Legendenlieder (Kommissionsverlag Rombach & Co., 1967, 1969, 1971); Hungarian Folk Music, Qualiton LPX 10095, -6, -7, -8, and LPX 18001, -2, -3, -4 (8 discs, n.d.).
  19. Norsk Folke Musikk, FEP 21-29, FLP 102-103 (n.d.).
  20. James Porter, "Recordings of extra-American music," Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 85, No. 338 (October-December 1972), p. 404.
  21. Nettl, op. cit., p. 56. The more detailed problems of field work are discussed in Chapter 3, pp. 62-97.
  22. See Roger D. Abrahams, ed., A Singer and Her Songs, Almeda Riddle's Book of Ballads, 1970, p. 156ff for a discussion by the editor of the singer's distinction between these two techniques.

23. See Leonard B. Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music, 1956, pp. 256-272, for an important attempt to distinguish image processes, connotations, moods, and affective experience in the apprehension of musical phenomena.

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